

Arkansas FFA Aims to Diversify Membership

LITTLE ROCK – At the Arkansas State Fair, there are always long lines of excited folks ready to take enjoy the sights and sounds of the annual attraction. Youngsters long to jump on the stomach-flipping rides, while their parents look enjoy the food and the musical acts.

At the Arkansas State Fair, thousands of smiling faces looking to board the rides, take in the food, and play the games. It's ten days of fun – and in 2015, fair officials embraced the record crowds and spectacular weather.

Another draw to the fair is the “Ag in Action” display organized by Arkansas FFA. Each year, students from nearly a dozen FFA chapters from across the state come to the fair to manage the display. This is a time in which the students help to feed and care for animals, such as chickens, ducks, and goats. Fairgoers can visit the exhibit and even feed the animals. Visitors can also see how crops are harvested.

“I love agriculture, and I think it’s a vital part of our system,” Ebony Murrow, a junior and treasurer of Hope FFA.

Murrow’s love for agriculture has developed over the years, even though she has not grown up on a farm. She describes her mother as a “city girl,” and as a result, Murrow has lived in St. Louis and parts of Tennessee, where she was not exposed to farming or agricultural practices. She was introduced to agriculture while in Hope and has never looked back.

“We need agriculture, and when everything else is gone, agriculture will be here,” Murrow said.

But Murrow admits being a member of FFA can be quite lonely. Over the past summer, she participated in the Arkansas FFA Leadership Camp at Lake Hamilton, and she was the only African American out of 200 students. African Americans are not only in the minority in Arkansas. The National FFA organization reports that only eight percent of its members are either African American or American Indian.

“I try to emphasize the need for more ag students, and we need more people educated in it. It’s a great opportunity,” said Michael Henagan, Hope High School’s ag teacher and FFA advisor.

Henagan, who is black, said he was one of two black students when he started college at Southern Arkansas University. After Christmas break, he was the only one for a number of years. Since then, he has always tried to encourage other blacks to consider joining FFA.

“I tell my students that everything is ag. Everything we do is pretty much agriculture: the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the chairs we sit in,” Henagan said.

Morrow, an aspiring agricultural attorney, said she hopes to change the mindset of her generation.

“You have to get rid of the stereotypical beliefs. I have recruited a lot of people,” she said.

Morrow believes her love for agriculture will benefit her as she pursues a career in ag law. She wants to stand up for farmers and ensure them that their job is valuable.

“Small farms don’t get enough recognition for what they do and they do so much,” she said.

Morrow said explaining the agricultural process to other students is one way to increase membership, even among minorities.

“When you think about McDonald’s, it’s easy to get food from there but we have to tell them where it comes from. You have to think about the people on the farm who work so you can get that food,” Morrow said.

About FFA: *FFA is an intercurricular student organization for those interested in agriculture and leadership. FFA continues to help the next generation rise up to meet those challenges by helping its members to develop their own unique talents and explore their interests in a broad range of agricultural career pathways.*

About the Arkansas Department of Career Education: *The Arkansas Department of Career Education (ACE) provides leadership and contributing resources to serve the diverse and changing career educational needs of Arkansas youth, adults, and persons living with disabilities. For more information about ACE and other programs please visit the website www.ace.arkansas.gov or follow us on Twitter at @ARCareerEd.*

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